back and laughed deeply, and Grandmother joined me. When we regained our sobriety, I realized that her question was *very* serious, and that our laughter had helped us both to mask the implications.

"I guess they know what I'm writing about, Grandmother, but I can't really be concerned with the authorities."

"Some of this is very disturbing," she said, "and I just want you to be careful. I don't want you getting hurt out here."

"But Grandmother, isn't it important to tell the truth?"

"Yes, it is *always* important to tell the truth, but truth means different things to different people. Some people can't handle the truth, Essex. I just want you to be careful. I will always love you, and I will always be so proud of you and all of my grands. Each one of you is special to me. It would break my heart to see any harm happen to any one of you."

"I'll always love you, too," I said, then I leaned over and kissed her on the cheek and hugged her.

Of the many things that I remember about Grandmother, her question, "Do the authorities know what you're writing about?" and her cautioning me to be careful are the words that come back to me ringing with all the intensity and conviction of her love and concern. She could formulate such a question only because she had witnessed how dangerous it is for Black people to be outspoken in America.

Perhaps Grandmother knew that down the line I would be defending my right to speak artistically to the social, cultural, and political issues of my life. Maybe she knew that in the fall of 1987 the D.C. Commission for the Arts would attempt to censor a performance that I and my artistic collaborator, musician Wayson Jones, would present as part of the city's annual arts awards program. We were invited by the arts commission to perform on the program, but we were not expecting them to attempt to censor our work, an attempt that was launched around the word *corruption* because the arts commission feared, ironically, that the word would *insult* Mayor Marion Barry. The poem, "Family Jewels," which contains the word *corruption*, is about the difficulty Black residents of the city face getting a cab to stop and take us to our destination. "Corruption" is used in the poem only as a passing reference to define the political context in which the taxicab humiliations occur.



The director of the arts commission at the time, a Black woman named Barbara Nicholson, called me the afternoon of the program to suggest that I substitute another word for *corruption* or substitute another poem for "Family Jewels"—or don't show up; excuses would be made for our absence, and we would still be paid our performance fee. I falsely agreed to substitute the poem, knowing that once Wayson and I were on stage, we would do exactly as we had intended and read "Family Jewels." The audience gave us thunderous applause, and I gave the audience the "tea" concerning the censorship attempt by a commission supposedly designed to support and encourage artistic development.

Perhaps Grandmother knew that WPFW-FM, a nonprofit progressive radio station based in Washington, D.C., and a member of the Pacifica broadcast network, would edit poetry that Wayson and I had presented on their "The Poet and the Poem" program in 1988. It was one thing to edit out the language in my work that the Federal Communications Commission deems offensive, but it was another thing to finally hear the broadcast and to realize that not just the "seven dirty words" but ideas and concepts were edited without our permission.

Maybe Grandmother knew that the editor of a Black literary journal based in the United States would call me and tell me that I should stop making public criticisms about the work of Robert Mapplethorpe regarding images of Black males. Even though the editor said that he agreed with my